



The First Sunday of Lent (C)
February 21, 2010
Luke 4:1-13
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Many years ago when I was working on my first master's at the University of Minnesota, I had a church job. All organ students have church jobs when their studying organ. For five years, I was the Liturgical Coordinator, organist and one of three choir directors at a large Lutheran Church in St. Paul called Gloria Dei Lutheran. One of the choirs I directed was a handbell choir.

One day, I got a call from a rather soft spoken person who asked if I might be interested in having my handbell choir on a new CD. I had no idea that anyone knew about the handbell choir. Gloria Dei was a prestigious church but the handbell choir? I founded the choir, and we worked hard and did good things, but a CD?

The voice on the phone told me that his name was Michael Joncas. He was producing a CD of his music in the Chapel of St. Thomas University in St. Paul, and he had heard of Gloria Dei's handbell choir. I, of course, said yes, and off we went.

Little did I know who Michael Joncas was at the time. First, he is a parish priest in the Archdiocese of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Second, he is the published composer of the music, "On Eagle's Wings," the same "You who dwell" which we are singing today at the Offertory. My handbell choir ended up on two of his CD's.

I share this story because my acceptance of that invitation meant that I got to know a wonderful human being. He not only writes fine contemporary liturgical music but is a truly remarkably prayerful and spiritual man. He eventually became my spiritual director, a treasured relationship that lasted for two years as I discerned whether God was calling me to be a priest or not.

Treasured relationships: We all have them. We all need them. We all long to have them in our lives: people with whom we share life, share hopes, share dreams and share ourselves. Some of those treasured relationships are with family members, some with co-workers, some with parishioners, some with life-long friends in faraway places and others with new friends. No matter what, we realize that we don't live in the world alone. Our interactions with others for whom we have great affection are extremely important to us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus found himself in the desert or in this translation, the wilderness. He appears to be alone. However, we know that he was never really alone, that even when he went out away from crowds, the noise of being followed and clung to, he was consistently in relationship with his Father. For this the First Sunday of Lent, we find Jesus in the desert, presumably in communion with his Father, but most assuredly tempted by what the scriptures call the devil and who we might call, the tempter.

If we look carefully at this account in Luke's gospel, we can probably determine that it wasn't an actual event in history. It falls into three scenes with three temptations, in three different places, in rapid succession: first, Jesus encounters the tempter in the desert; second, the tempter led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world which would have been impossible from one vantage point; third, the tempter took him to Jerusalem and placed him on a pinnacle of the Temple. In the last temptation, the tempter quoted a portion of today's psalm, Psalm 91. He smugly suggested that if Jesus was the Son of God, then, Jesus needn't worry. God would command angels to protect him and on their hands they would bear him up, so that he would not dash his foot against a stone and fall.

Whether these three temptations actually happened as they appear on the surface or not is really not that important. What is more important is what they symbolize in the life of Jesus and for us. Jesus, fully divine yet fully human, was tempted. He was tempted with power, dominion and governance over kingdoms of the world.

Though he was tempted, the good news is that he made the decision to remain faithful to the mission for which he came into the world. He wrestled with the tempter who perhaps was not outside of him but who was actually deep within him. The turmoil he experienced came from within not from without.

The temptations occurred one after the other. Jesus, tempted within him, had three opportunities to turn his back on God and embrace a life of power. After all, were not the Jews in anticipation of a savior who would free them from the Romans, a great warrior king who would lead them in battle, a liberator from captives? Jesus could have been a true superstar, but he decided to remain faithful.

Those forty days and nights in the desert presented Jesus with opportunities for temptation. They also presented him with even greater opportunities of grace in communion with God, a treasured relationship that was life-giving, sustaining and empowering.

You and I are bombarded with temptations, but we have a great opportunity to be in communion with God, in a treasured relationship with God, throughout these forty days of Lent. Lent has a great history in which the truly sinful were given another chance with God and the community of the faithful, a time of introspection, examination of conscience, repentance and absolution. We, too, are given this opportunity once again this year. The word, Lent, really means 'spring.' So perhaps, it could mean for us to *spring up* and *grow* in our relationship with God.

Even today, many people start Lent by promising to give up all kinds of things. Giving up things is certainly a way of experiencing Lent but *adding* things that might help us to be better people that might help us to be more gentle, loving and kind, that might help us to draw nearer to God--those are the things that I want to do during this Season of Lent. Those are the things that I believe will draw us into the *presence* of God about which I spoke last Sunday and on Ash Wednesday. As a community of faith, we long to be deeply spiritual, deeply connected to God, deeply rooted within a treasured relationship with God, so that when times of temptation come, we can draw on God's grace to help us to be strong.

As we journey together this Lent, may I again suggest that we make more time for God, that we pray more, that we worship more, that we read the scriptures more, and that we contribute what we can to help the poor and needy of our world. I truly do believe that if we do these things, we will experience a remarkably holy Lent like none other before. Amen.